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ABSTRACT

Although the development of self-concept among children has been of great interest, understanding self-concept has remained elusive and confusing. There are two main theories of self-concept development. The first theory is the notion of "developmental self." Proponents include psychologists and psychiatrists. Self-concept develops in a manner similar to, and heavily influenced by, the individual's biological growth. The role of the environment is to help unfold the individual's self-concept. Interaction between the individual and the environment results in exhibition of the characteristics of the self. The second theory is the "social self" theory. Proponents include behaviorists and phenomenologists. Behaviorists view the development of self-concept as the interactional product of the individual and the environment. Phenomenologists view self-concept as a development that occurs through one's perceptions of how others respond to him/her. Teachers and schools have recognized the relationship between self-worth and academic performance; a student who feels good about himself is usually a high achiever. Applying self-concept theory in schools has been complicated. Two aspects of self-concept theory that pose problems for schools are: (1) the conceptualization of self-concept as a global construct (in contrast to a set of different and independent self-perceptions); and (2) the belief among educators that positiveness of self-concept enhances academic achievement--for on this issue, studies have provided conflicting and misleading results. Research studies done to investigate these phenomena have indicated that the area-specific construct may be most useful in the school setting. (A five-page bibliography is included.) (ABL)

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Self-concept and Achievement: Theory and Practice

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The development of self-concept among children has been of great interest to parents, educators and those who respect the importance of this construct. Understanding self-concept, however, has remained elusive and confusing. According to Caplin (1969), the elusiveness and confusion about self-concept is due to the lack of a precise definition of this construct. Scheirer and Kraut (1979) have identified four components of self-concept: categorization, evaluation, the comparative and the affective. In their words, "self-concept should not be conceptualized as a simple, unitary phenomenon, but as a complex construct, having descriptive, evaluative, comparative and affective aspects which can and should be discriminated" (p. 141). A review of the literature indicates that there are two main accepted theories in regard to self-concept development. The first theory is the notion of "developmental self." Psychologists, psychiatrists, and ontologists are the primary proponents of this theory. In their view, self-concept develops in a manner similar to and heavily influenced by the biological growth of the individual. Thus, self-concept unfolds as one matures--"the growth and channeling of all that the individual was born with"

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(Webster & Sobieczeck 1974, p. 1). The role of the environment in this case is to help unfold the individual's self-concept. Interaction between the individual and the environment results in exhibition of the characteristics of the self.

The second school of thought is the "social self" group, often called the environmentalists. Among the environmentalists are two subgroups, behaviorists and phenomenologists. The behaviorists view the development of self-concept as the interactional product of the individual and the environment. They would rather conceptualize the individual's self-concept as constituting a learned reaction to external stimuli. The components being emphasized in this theory are categorization and evaluation.

> For children first developing their categorization and evaluation, the most important social influences are those of the nuclear family, especially the parents, who are powerful and nearly everpresent controllers of both stimuli and satisfactions. (Scheirer & Kraut, 1979, p. 142)

The phenomenologists, on the other hand, view self-concept as a development that occurs through one's perceptions of how others respond to him/her. Thus, the individual's self-concept is a reflection of how one perceives the responses of others towards him/her (Fitts, 1971). The individual's self-concept is

dependent on the particular social group to which the individual belongs and to the self-characteristics socially assigned by the group. This theory focuses on categorization and evaluation components of self-concept.

Scheirer and Kraut (1979) have identified another theory of self-concept which they have labelled "internal needs theory." This theory focuses on the affective component of self-concept rather than on the categorization and evaluation aspects. This theory assumes that children, especially from ages three to seven, have "internal needs which the environment must satisfy in order for the child to feel good about himself" (p. 143). The provisions of freedom to explore, make choices, and follow internal urgings ensure the child's positive self-concept.

Self-Concept and the Public School Curriculum

Historically, teachers have recognized that there is a relationship between self-worth and academic performance. They have noted that a student who feels good about him/herself is usually a high academic achiever, while the one with low self-esteem tends to do poorly in school. Consequently, some school districts, such as Newark, New Jersey, have incorporated positive self-concept development in their curricula. In 1976, a state-wide school/community by school/community goal process in California placed self-concept development among its primary

goals for school children (Canfield & Wells, 1976). The famous litany of Reverend Jackson, "I am somebody," is an example of the importance society places on self-worth. In their book, One Hundred Ways to Improve the Self-Concept of Students, Canfield and Wells suggest ways in which teachers and parents can help improve the self-concept of children. Such books have been part of the impetus promoting self-concept development as an achievable and desirable objective in the public schools.

There are two aspects of self-concept theorizing that seem problematic for its use in the school setting. The aspects are a) the conceptualization of self-concept as a global construct and b) the conceptualization of self-concept as enhancing academic achievement.

The controversy in self-concept theorizing is whether to view self-concept as a global model or as a set of different and independent self-perceptions. This controversy permeates all the theoretical positions so far mentioned. The conceptualization of self-concept as a global construct emanated from the clinical setting. While clinical psychologists and counselors have found the global contruct useful, school officials should find it troublesome. Under the global self-concept conceptualization, it is held that "When one aspect of the self-concept is affected, a ripple effect results and thus the entire self-concept is

affected" (Muller, Chambliss, & Nelson, 1982). The application of self-concept enhancement under this theory requires that teachers and counselors pry into the home life of the student. According to Muller, Chambliss, & Nelson (1982),

> Applying this conceptualization to the classroom, self-concept enhancement would necessitate the teacher's involvement with both school and non-school aspects of the student's life in order to effectively monitor and manage global self-concept. This seems to place the teacher in the rather precarious position of potentially infringing upon what parents may believe to be privacy of the home. In such a case, the possibility of effectively teaching to self-concept objectively seems limited or even remote. (p. 4)

Muller and his associates have suggested an alternative view to the global conceptualization of self-concept. In their view, for the purpose of the school setting, self-concept can best be viewed as organized into sets of independent and discrete areas of the construct. In a study done by Larned and Muller (1979), four school-related areas of self-concept (physical maturity, peer relations, academic success, and school adaptiveness) were identified. In another study done by Mintz and Muller (1977) in which subjects from the fourth and sixth grades were used, specific areas of self-concept and global self-concept were correlated with academic achievement. The results of this study suggested that an area-specific model of self-concept is more useful than the global model as far as the school setting is

concerned. Muller, Chambliss, and Wood (1977) also correlated areas of self-concept (physical maturity, peer relations, academic success, and school adaptiveness) with reading, language, mathematics, and composite achievement scores of junior high school students. Academic-success self-concept was found to moderately correlate with each of the achievement measures (r = .39 to .32 P <.05). This study suggested that the relationship between self-concept and achievement may be factor-specific, "with that area of self-concept most reflective of academic success being most directly related to measured academic achievement" (p. 1118).

Relationship Between Self-Concept and Achievement

On the issue of the relationship between the positiveness of self-concept and academic achievement, studies have provided conflicting and misleading results. For example, in a study of one thousand urban seventh graders, Brookover, Thomas, & Patterson (1964) found moderate positive correlation between self-concept and grade point average (r = .42). Other studies by Kerensky (1966) and Campbell (1967) and Coopersmith (1967) have found low positive correlation between self-concept and academic achievement at the fourth, fifth, and sixth-grade levels (r = .3). In a recent study done by Mintz and Muller (1977), using fourth and sixth graders with Spanish and non-Spanish surnames,

success and student self-concept were found to correlate positively with achievement. However, this correlation was low ($\underline{r}$ = .19 to .39 $\underline{P}$ < .05). Other studies done by Blanchard and Reedy (1970), Boyce (1970) and Meighan (1971) have shown low positive correlation or no correlation between self-concept and achievement. While these studies have provided evidence that self-concept influences academic achievement, "they have encouraged educators to believe that special attempts to enhance students' self-concept might increase their educational progress" (Scheirer & Kraut, 1979, p. 132).

Attempting to show the cause and effect relationship between self-concept and academic achievement, Muller and Spuhler (1976) manipulated the self-concept of college freshmen. The self-concept of one group was raised, the self-concept of the second group was lowered, and the third group was used as a control. The changes in self-concept were achieved via counseling. After the intended self-concept changes had been achieved, the three groups were compared against their ability to learn a foreign language. The results showed no significant differences between the means of the self-concept raised group and the control mean. The group with the lowered self-concept, on the other hand, showed a lower learning rate than the control group. In a repeated experiment done by Sharp and Muller (1978) in which

college freshmen were again used, the experimental results suggested that anxiety may have been induced among the lowered self-concept group. Thus anxiety, rather than low self-concept, may have impaired learning.

Muller, Chambliss, and Muller (1978) at New Mexico State University have proposed an alternative view of positiveness of self-concept. In their view, students who are taught to have accurate self-concept in relation to how well they do in a particular subject may be able to use this accurate view of themselves to make decisions that will eventually help them to perform better in school.

In her extensive literature review, Wyllie (1974) stated that theorizing about the self-concept of the child has focused on an emergence of a sense of self as a separate person. The development of gender identity then follows. In self-concept formation, most theorists agree that social interactions are of crucial importance. "While the contribution of organic sensations and direct body awareness ought not be ignored, a concept of self can scarcely be developed without adequate interpersonal relations" (Yamamoto, 1972, p. 3). There is general agreement that the self is both object and behavior; these two aspects relate to self-concept. Thus, self-concept is the total sum of self-observance, experience, and judgment of the

individual (Fitts, 1971). While experience may seem the critical factor in the development of self-concept, Fitts (1971) noted that longitudinal studies done on increased experience of college students have failed to show corresponding changes in self-concept. Thus, most theorists tend to agree that the self-concept, once clearly differentiated and structured, is a fairly stable entity. The same theorists, on the other hand, agree that throughout life, the self-concept is continually developing and changing. "In this respect, it is hard to differentiate clearly between the topics of self-concept development and self-concept change" (Fitts, 1971, p. 35). The period when self-concept differentiation and structure occur is not clearly noted in the literature.

Self-Concept Across Grade Levels

Studies on self-concept development among school children have shown some differences. Piers and Harris (1964) studied the development of self-concept among third, sixth, and tenth graders in which the self-concepts of the third and tenth graders were found to be significantly higher than those of the sixth graders. However, no significant differences were found between gender withing the same grade level. Larned and Muller (1979) also studied the development of self-concept and one of its subsets, self-esteem, among 419 Anglo and Spanish-American children across

grades one through nine. In their study, different developmental patterns in regard to the tested areas were found. A decline in academic success and school achievement in both self-concept and self-esteem were detected in the higher grades. With respect to gender, only one significant difference was detected among the eight self-measures studied. No difference in the ethnicity variable was found. In a more recent study, the developmental pattern of self-concept and its subsets, self-esteem and self-ideal, were tested in the areas of physical maturity, peer relations, academic success, and school adaptiveness. This study included United States, Mexican and Chilean school children in grades two, four, six, and eight. Velasco-Barraza and Muller (1982) reported that for physical maturity and peer relations, the differences between national groups were small and each of the self-measures remained relatively stable across grades. The academic-success self-concept and self-esteem became less positive as grade level increased; the most rapid decline was among U.S. and Mexican students. Since the overall differences of self-concept development were small, Velasco-Barraza and Muller concluded that there are substantial similarities in self-concept development across the national groups and a tendency for differences between national groups to decrease as grade level increased.

Self-Concept Studies of African School Children

There are very few self-concept studies reported from the continent of Africa. Among these studies, only one directly relates to self-concept development. In her introduction, Ezeilo (1983) noted the lack of self-concept studies from Third World countries. Ezeilo's study examined the self-concept of urban school adolescents and that of rural students. This study revealed no statistical differences in the overall self-esteem of the students when sex and setting are used as the independent variables. This study suggested that "contrary to observations in Western cultures, where males were found to be personally oriented, the Nigerian-Igbo males and females both seemed equally personally oriented in their self-concepts" (p. 56).

Labenne and Greene (1969) have taken the position that self-concept is not a fairly stable entity, but rather an entity that is modified through the process of maturation. Moreover, they contend that self-concept can be taught.

Summary

In summary, there are two main accepted theories in regard to how self-concept develops. The first theory, which is supported by psychologists and psychiatrists, is the notion of "developmental self." This theory views self-concept as a

process of maturation-- the interaction between the individual and the environment. The second school of thought is the "social self" supported by the environmentalists. Within the environmentalists are the behaviorists and the phenomenologists. The behaviorists view self-concept development as a learned reaction to external stimuli. The phenomenologists, on the other hand, view self-concept as a result of one's perceptions from other's responses.

Applying self-concept theory in the school setting has been complicated. The two aspects of self-concept theorizing that pose problems for their usage are the conceptualization of self-concept as a global construct and the belief among educators that positiveness of self-concept enhances academic achievement. Research studies done to investigate these phenomenona have indicated that the area-specific construct may be most useful in the school setting.

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